

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8390
INFO AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL
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AMEMBASSY LIMA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 QUITO 3696

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, EC
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: ATMOSPHERICS

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION HAS BEEN SLOW TO GENERATE EXCITEMENT OWING TO SEVERAL FACTORS, BUT VOTER INTEREST HAS BEEN PICKING UP RECENTLY. THE PUBLIC IS ADJUSTING TO A NEW STYLE CAMPAIGN MARKED BY HEAVY USE OF TELEVISION, MORE TOLERANCE FOR THE OPPOSING CANDIDATE, AND THE LACK OF SHARP IDEOLOGICAL OR PROGRAMMATIC CONFRONTATIONS. HOWEVER, THE SEEDS FOR DISRUPTION AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE REMAIN PRESENT IN THE MORE TRADITIONAL CAMPAIGN METHODS. EVEN IF SIGNIFICANT APATHY REMAINS BY JULY 16, IT SHOULD NOT AFFECT VOTING PATTERNS UNDULY IN VIEW OF THE COMPULSORY VOTING. END SUMMARY.

2. ON JULY 16, ECUADOR WILL HAVE ITS FIRST OPPORTUNITY IN TEN YEARS TO ELECT A PRESIDENT. PERHAPS SURPRISINGLY IN VIEW OF THE DECADE-LONG HIATUS OF CIVILIAN AND MILITARY DICTATORSHIPS, THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN SLOW TO GENERATE THE ENTHUSIASM AND EXCITEMENT WHICH HAVE MARKED PREVIOUS PRESIDENTIAL CONTESTS. MUCH OF THIS LACK OF
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EMOTION IS ATTRIBUTABLE TO THE DAMPER ON POPULAR PASSIONS WHICH HAS BEEN IMPOSED BY THE LONG DRAWN-OUT RETORNO MACHINERY ITSELF WHICH BEGAN TO CHUG UNCERTAINLY TOWARD ITS CONCLUSION MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO. MUCH CAN ALSO BE LAID AT THE FEET OF THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT, WHICH IN ITS ATTEMPT TO DEFINE THE APPROPRIATE PROFILE OF THE CONTEST FOR PERCEIVED ALTRUSITIC OR SELF-SERVING REASONS,

MANAGED TO CREATE AN AIR OF TENTATIVENESS AND SUSPICION AMONG THE ELECTORATE. DESPITE THESE PROBLEMS, THE DIMENSIONS OF THE CAMPAIGN HAVE CRYSTALLIZED IN THE LAST TEN DAYS AND BOTH INTEREST AND CREDIBILITY HAVE INCREASED COMMENSURATELY.

3. THE "FEELING" THAT A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS AT HAND DIFFERS REMARKABLY FROM PLACE TO PLACE. IN GUAYAQUIL AND MACHALA, FOR INSTANCE, NEARLY EVERY AVAILABLE WALL SPACE IS FESTOONED WITH PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN POSTERS OR GRAFFITI OF VARIOUS ARTISTIC LEVELS---IN SOME PLACES TWO OR THREE DEEP. IN QUITO, ON THE OTHER HAND, COLONIAL AND MODERN EDIFICES HAVE THUS FAR BEEN ABLE TO PRESERVE THEIR RELATIVE PRISTINE STATE, AND THE EXISTENCE OF A CAMPAIGN IS ONLY GRUDGINGLY ACKNOWLEDGED BY THE POSTERS---MOSTLY FOR LOCAL OFFICES---ON UTILITY POLES. THE DISPARITY MAY BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE FACT THAT BOTH GUAYAS AND EL ORO PROVINCES HAVE ALREADY RECEIVED SERIOUS CAMPAIGN VISITATIONS BY MAJOR CANDIDATES, WHILE HARDLY ANYONE HAS DARED TO GAMBLE AGAINST THE INDIFFERENCE OF THE QUITENOS BY SCHEDULING A MAJOR RALLY AT THIS EARLY STAGE IN THE CAMPAIGN.

4. THIS PRESENT ELECTION CAMPAIGN IS THE FIRST IN WHICH TELEVISION HAS HAD A SIGNIFICANT ROLE. WITH ABOUT 400,000 SETS IN THE COUNTRY CONCENTRATED IN THE MAJOR CITIES,
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IT IS ESTIMATED THAT MORE THAN HALF OF THE ELECTORATE WILL BE EXPOSED TO TELEVISION CAMPAIGNING. SERVING AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR EASY ACCESS TO LARGE NUMBERS OF VOTERS, TELEVISION COULD GIVE AN ADVANTAGE TO SIXTO DURAN-BALLEN AND RAUL CLEMENTE HUERTA WHO ARE THE MOST GENEROUSLY FINANCED CANDIDATES. ON THE OTHER HAND, NONE OF THE CANDIDATES HAS YET BEEN ABLE TO MASTER THE MEDIUM AND DURAN-BALLEN MAY ACTUALLY HAVE BEEN HURT EARLIER IN THE CAMPAIGN BY AN ESPECIALLY INEPT PERFORMANCE.

5. HOWEVER, TELEVISION'S GREATEST IMPACT MAY BE NOT IN WINNING VOTES, BUT IN ESTABLISHING A NEW, AND MANY HOPE, A MORE WHOLESOME POLITICAL STYLE. HISTORICALLY CONFRONTATIONAL, ECUADOREAN POLITICS HAVE OFTEN BEEN REDUCED TO SLANDERING OPPONENTS IN THE VILEST PERSONAL TERMS AND TO VIOLENTLY DISRUPTING A RIVAL'S RALLIES. BUT TELEVISION VIEWERS ARE NOW FREQUENTLY TREATED TO DISPLAYS OF THE CANDIDATES IN UNPRECEDENTED AND REASONABLE DISCOURSE WITH THEIR COMPETITORS. IT IS OBVIOUSLY DIFFICULT FOR THEM TO ATTACK EACH OTHER AFTER HANDSHAKES AND SMILES HAVE BEEN EXCHANGED AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PROGRAM. AND APPARENTLY AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IS

NOT APPROVED BY THE VIEWERS: WHEN DEMOCRATIC LEFT
CANDIDATE RIDRIGO BORJA RECENTLY ATTEMPTED TO BAIT
DURAN-BALLEN IN A TELEVISION MEETING, HIS CLOSEST
SUPPORTERS WERE STILL WINCING THE NEXT DAY AND MANY OF
THE UNDECIDED SEEMED TO TURN AWAY FROM HIM.

6. THE BLUNTING OF SHARP PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES BY
TELEVISION HAS BEEN PARALLELED BY A TENDENCY TO HOMOGENIZE
THE ISSUES AS WELL. AT PRESENT THERE APPEARS TO BE FEW
SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES AMONG THE FOUR SERIOUS CANDIDATES
(DURAN-BALLEN, HUERTA, ROLDOS, AND BORJA) ON THE MAJOR
ISSUES OF THE CAMPAIGN. THOSE ISSUES, WHICH INCLUDE
FOREIGN INDEBTEDNESS, PETROLEUM POLICY, AGRARIAN REFORM,
CIVILIAN-MILITARY RELATIONSHIPS, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT,
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HAVE EVOKED POSITIONS FROM THE CANDIDATES THAT DIFFER IN
DEGREE RATHER THAN SUBSTANCE. IT WAS SOMEWHAT SHOCKING--
AND UNDOUBTEDLY DISCOMFITING TO BOTH THE "RIGHTIST"
DURAN AND THE "POPULIST" ROLDOS TO HEAR THE MODERATOR
ON THEIR RECENT TELEVISION DISCUSSION CONCLUDE THAT
THEY SEEMED TO HAVE FEW SUBSTANTIVE DIFFERENCES.

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7. THIS HOMOGENIZATION OF THE ISSUES RESULTS FROM SEVERAL FACTORS. FIRST, WHILE FEARING TO DISREGARD NATIONALIST OR REFORMIST SHIBBOLETHS, THE SERIOUS CONTENDERS ARE ALSO AWARE OF THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REALITIES WHICH USUALLY CONTRADICT DEMAGOGIC POSTURING. FOR EXAMPLE, ALL CANDIDATES GIVE LIP SERVICE TO ACKNOWLEDGING THE EVILS OF TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS, BUT ALL HAVE ALSO ACKNOWLEDGED THAT FURTHER FOREIGN INVESTMENT IS NECESSARY FOR ECONOMIC, ESPECIALLY PETROLEUM, DEVELOPMENT. PERHAPS ANOTHER REASON FOR THE LACK OF DIVERSITY ON ISSUES IS THAT MOST POLITICIANS, UNSURE OF THEIR CONSTITUENCIES AFTER TEN YEARS, DO NOT WISH TO OFFEND ANY POTENTIAL VOTER. WHILE ONLY ROLDOS AND MAUGE POSSESS THE CREDENTIALS TO MAKE EFFECTIVE APPEAL TO THE LOWER CLASSES, MAUGE HAS NO POSSIBILITY OF ELECTION AND ROLDOS IS CAREFULLY AVOIDING STRIDENT POSITIONS IN THE HOPE OF DEMONSTRATING TO THE MILITARY AND THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT THAT HE IS NOT MERELY THE THREAT OF BUCARAM IN DISGUISE. THIS HAS RESULTED IN THE CANDIDATES STRIKING VIGOROUSLY PROGRESSIVE POSES, BUT THEN QUICKLY QUALIFYING OR PURPOSELY FUZZING THE WAYS

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IN WHICH THEY WOULD FULFILL THIS IMAGE.

8. THE SHADOW CAST BY THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIP CANNOT BE DISCOUNTED AS ANOTHER REASON FOR RESTRAINED DEBATE. ALTHOUGH ALL CANDIDATES ARE RUNNING AGAINST THE DICTATORSHIP, A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF CIRCUMSPECTION IS UNDERSTANDABLE. THERE IS STILL SOME FEAR THAT SHARP CRITICISM OF THE MILITARY COULD DELAY THE RETURN TO CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT.

9. IF TELEVISION HAS PROMOTED MORE TOLERANCE AND ISSUES HAVE BEEN HOMOGENIZED, TRADITIONAL VOTE-GETTING METHODS COULD LEAD TO A MORE VIOLENCE PRONE CAMPAIGN. THE CAMPAIGN SWING THROUGH VILLAGES AND TOWNS CULMINATING IN A GIANT RALLY TO SPEECHIFYING IN THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL STILL HAS MANAGED TO STIMULATE THE PASSIONS OF THE PROVINCIALS. IT IS HERE WHERE THE NICETIES OF TELEVISION DEBATES ARE DROPPED AND THE COMPETITION TENDS TO REVERT TO THE FERAL. THE CFP AND MARXISTS HAVE ATTEMPTED SEVERAL TIMES IN THE LAST FEW DAYS TO STAGE COUNTER-RALLIES AT SIXTO DURAN RALLIES, AND DEMOCRATIC LEFT SUPPORTERS ARE ALSO REPORTED TO BE INCREASINGLY OBSTREPEROUS AT OPPOSITION RALLIES. HOWEVER, THE MOST SERIOUS VIOLENCE THUS FAR HAS OCCURRED NOT AT A RALLY, BUT IN RESIDENTIAL GUAYAQUIL WHERE REPORTEDLY A GANG OF CFP THUGS (ONE REPORTED TO BE BUCARAM'S ELDEST SON) FIRED SHOTS AT THE HOUSE OF A CARLOS JULIO AROSEMENA SUPPORTER ON

MAY 29. THUS, WHILE THE CAMPAIGN MAY THUS FAR BE THE
TAMEST IN RECENT MEMORY, IT STILL HAS THE POTENTIAL TO
DEGENERATE INTO A BRAWL.

10. ALTHOUGH MOST PROFESSIONAL POLITICIANS WITH
SUFFICIENT MEMORY CLAIM THAT THERE EXISTS UNUSUAL APATHY
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FOR THIS STAGE OF A PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, THIS MAY BE
A TEMPORARY PHENOMENON ATTRIBUTABLE TO SOME OF THE FACTORS
DESCRIBED ABOVE. IT IS ALSO DUE TO THE FACT THAT NONE OF
THE CANDIDATES CAN BE DESCRIBED AS CHARISMATIC AND THE
ABSENCE OF FIRE-BREATHERS LIKE VELASCO IBARRA, BUCARAM,
AND CARLOS JULIO AROSEMENA, NO MATTER HOW NEGATIVE THEIR
INFLUENCE ON THE POLITICAL PROCESS, IS DEFINITELY FELT AT
THE PRESENT TIME. HOWEVER, AS THE VOTERS BECOME ACCUSTOMED
TO THE NEW FACES AND THE NEW STYLE, INTEREST WILL CONTINUE
TO PICK UP. BUT EVEN IF THERE IS SOME LACK OF EMOTION
AT THIS POINT, COMPULSORY VOTING WILL ASSURE THAT 70-80
PERCENT WILL GET TO THE POLLS ANYWAY AND THEREBY MINIMIZE THE
EFFECTS OF APATHY.
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